

The challenge of making a Bible translation... a 2-step process...

1. How authentic and reliable are the ancient manuscripts? Which Text should be used for the Bible translation?

Textual Criticism is the scientific method used to evaluate the authenticity and reliability of the ancient manuscripts and provides the means to determine how they relate to each other; the objective is to find the earliest copy. *Textual Criticism* considers 2 types of evidences but a third factor plays a role in this first of a two-step process:

- a) External evidence: This process evaluates the quality and age of the manuscripts as the means to evaluate the variant under study.
- b) Internal evidence: This process focuses on studying the copyist / authors such as their scribal methods, habits, and vocabulary.
- c) Disagreement among translators. There are instances where there may be disagreement on the best text that should be used for the translation; the external or internal evidence may not be clear or delineating. Thus the majority vote text is used for translation and the minority vote text is placed in the margin of some Bibles (i.e. see NIV vs. KJV 1 Cor 13:3).

2. What method should be used to translate the Text into the desired language?

There are 3 theoretical methods of translating one language into another, and their differences reflect how they choose to approach the historical time difference between the two languages (i.e. words, grammar, phrases, history, culture, etc.). The problem of *historical distance* can be readily seen in the challenge of translating weights (i.e. talents vs. pounds, etc.), measure (i.e. cubits vs. meters, etc.), money (shekel vs. dollar, etc. [what about inflation?]), and euphemisms (i.e. toilet vs. water closet, etc.).

Literal: This method attempts to translate the grammar, language, and style of the original language and no attempt to bridge the *historical distance* between the two languages. Some of the challenges are a) words, terms, phrases of one language lack any complement in another, and b) the translation is harder to read and understand.

- 1. **NASB**: The New American Standard Bible was commissioned by the Lockman Foundation (1970). This translation, which took over 10 years to complete, used the earliest manuscripts as its basis; however, some scholars debate if they were the best available texts. It is considered a new translation. Because of its literal translation and some inconsistency in retaining the Greek and Hebrew structure, this translation can be at times a little difficult to read. It is best known for its commitment to a literal translation.
- 2. **KJV**: The King James Version was commissioned by King James I (1611). This was the only complete Bible available from 1611 to the 1880s. The translation was based on the best available manuscripts at the time. Since then, archeological discoveries of earlier manuscripts and advances in anthropologic and historical understanding of early Semitic history have provided a better basis for the more recent translations of the Bible. This translation is noted principally for its majestic style.
- 3. **NKJV**: The New King James Version was developed by Thomas Nelson Publishers (1982). This is a revised update of the KJV with the changes primarily in vocabulary, grammar, and punctuation to make it more easily readable while maintaining its majestic and lyrical style. The revision, which took 7 years, sought equivalence to the original and was not a new translation.

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4. **NRSV:** The New Revised Standard Version was authorized by the Council of Churches (1990). This project took 27 years and is a revision that incorporated the latest archaeological discoveries, scholarship, and English language. It follows its predecessors (American Standard Version 1901 and Revised Standard Version 1952) in attempting to maintain the traditions of Tyndale-King James. It is noted for its efforts of using non-sexist language where common gender is intended.

Dynamic: This method attempts to translate the grammar, words, and style of the original language into the equivalent of the other but maintains the *historical distance* of historical facts and objects.

5. **NIV:** The New International Version (1978) was sponsored by the New York Bible Society International. This 10-year effort was a completely new translation and independent of any previous translation. Whereas all translations had an editorial board overseeing the work of translation, this translation had a Committee on Bible Translation that examined and approved the text after being screened and reviewed by two editorial committees. Some consider this perhaps the best scholarship in the evangelical tradition.

6. **NAB:** The New American Bible was translated by the Catholic Bible Association (1970). This project took 25 years and was the first American Catholic translation made from the original languages: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek; previous Roman Catholic translations were made from the Latin Vulgate. This was a completely new translation and independent of any previous translation. Some consider this perhaps the best committee translation in the Catholic tradition and the most readable English translation produced by Catholic scholars.

7. **NEB:** The New English Bible was the result of a cooperative effort with British Protestant churches and Oxford and Cambridge University Presses (1970). It took 24 years to complete and was a completely new translation independent of any previous translation. It is noted for its use of the newer meanings for Hebrew words not found in other Bible translations; however, many scholars contend that some of the newer meanings do not represent consensus scholarship.

8. **GNB:** The Good News Bible was translated by Robert Bratcher with the American Bible Society (1979). Also known as Today's English Version (TEV), it took 15 years to complete. With its designed limitation in vocabulary and simplified structures, this translation is known for its ease in reading. It is considered the best translation by a single author.

Free: This method attempts to translate the ideas of the original language into another and is usually done by a single translator. There are three main areas of risk here: a) the reader is accepting the interpretation of the paraphraser, b) there is the possibility of theological distortion despite the translator's best effort, and c) the reader does not realize that the translation is a paraphrase. All translators are very cognizant of the dangers of paraphrases and state it clearly in their introductions. For the severe critic, the question that one would have to consider is, "if any comprehension is paramount, which translation would you want?"

9. **LB:** The Living Bible Paraphrased (1970) was paraphrased by Kenneth Taylor. This took 16 years of part-time work and was initiated by the desire to have material for family devotions with his children. He based most of his paraphrase on the American Standard Version (1901).

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When comparing various Bibles, invariably the question many ask is “which is the best?” The answer, of course, is, “it depends.” All Bibles have their advantages, disadvantages, and criticisms, especially among the scholars. And, as language and culture changes, there will always be a need for newer translations. Everyone will have their preferences and, indeed, the Bibles themselves may have a sectarian bias as evidenced by the translating organization. Nevertheless, translating a Bible is tremendous work as witnessed by the scale of scholars involved and time it took to complete such an endeavor. In this light, and, often lost in comparative discussions, Bibles cannot be taken for granted. To help one discern which translation may suit their needs the best, the Bible reader would be advised to evaluate the following:

What type of reader are you? There are two considerations: a) how are your reading skills, and b) what literary style do you prefer? With so many translations, one has a choice never before available!

What is the text basis for the translation? The more recent the translations, generally, are more likely to have the best and earliest manuscripts available for study. Furthermore, they will likely benefit from the most current advances in the sciences of linguistics, archaeology, anthropology, and histo-cultural disciplines.

What translation method appeals to you (or how much paraphrasing would you desire)? Generally, the more paraphrasing that occurs, the easier it is to read; *no translation* exists that is 100% literal. In the list of Bibles above, they are rated in their order of literalness: the lower the number, the more literal the translation, and the higher the number, the more paraphrased the translation. The three theoretical methods of translation are shown with their relative amounts of paraphrasing:

Literal Method:	literal > paraphrase
Dynamic Method:	literal = paraphrase
Free Method:	literal < paraphrase

For Bible study, it is recommended that one have available two Bibles: 1) one with *dynamic* translation for its accuracy (of historical distance) and ease of reading, and 2) one with *literal* translation for its literal fidelity to the manuscripts that the Bible is based on. The *Free* translation would not be recommended for serious Bible study but does have a place in one’s library for those who seldom read or for those who desire a simpler text for reading (i.e. children).

For more information about the differences between Bible versions, see [The English Bible from KJV to NIV](#) by Jack P. Lewis

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